**Governor's Conference for Women**
**What Every Woman Should Know About Cancer - 11 a.m. to 12 p.m.**
**Remarks AS DELIVERED for Commissioner Susan Bass Levin**
**October 30, 2006**

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Thank you all for joining us here today.

In New Jersey, more than 21,000 women are diagnosed with cancer each year. One in eight women will get breast cancer. One in 60 women will get ovarian cancer.

About three years ago, I became one of those statistics.

I was at the doctor what was supposed to be a routine checkup. I felt fine, I told my internist and then the gynecologist.

I had no symptoms - just the normal complaints of a woman in a high stress job and too many late night dinners. Sure, my back ached sometimes. I had put on a few pounds. I was tired after a 12-hour workday. But I didn't feel sick. Just whispers.

And then that routine exam turned into routine tests – an ultrasound, a cat scan, blood work. The ovary should come out – the whispers were getting louder.

It was mid May. The state budget would be debated in June and I wanted to be there. I needed to defend the budget for my agency – to make sure that funds for important programs did not get cut. And so, I put the surgery off for a month – a mistake no one should ever make.

Two days after the surgery, my doctor said four words that changed my life in an instant: "You have ovarian cancer."

I looked down a long dark tunnel and wondered if I would ever come through.

Then a fragment of memory – Gilda Radner…Saturday Night Live…Ovarian Cancer.

I asked questions. And then I stopped – knowing that knowledge would have to wait. There would be plenty of time.

A nurse came into my room. She waited for me to tell her, for me to say the words aloud for the first time:

"I have ovarian cancer."

She sat with me all night, until I was ready to talk, about Cancer.

The next day, my post graduate education began.

You know the drill. I learned a whole new vocabulary. About cancer cells and chemo drugs and blood counts. I wrote everything down, as though keeping a journal would somehow change things. I searched the internet for hours into the night. There was no reliable screening test for ovarian cancer. I was sure I would not lose my hair because only 93 per cent of the women taking my chemc drugs lost their hair. I lost all my hair and wondered if it would ever grow back. I went to work each day but I went to sleep each night at 7 – sometimes I was so exhausted that I just wanted to sleep forever.

But I couldn't.

Or wouldn't.

And didn't.

Cancer changed me. I wouldn't be a victim, so I became a survivor.

But I learned a few powerful lessons - things they don't teach you in school – as I sat hooked up to cysplatin and taxol.

1. Keep moving.

    At first I couldn't walk to the end of my street. My daughters would joke that I walked so slowly that I was going backwards. But then I made it around the block. A little more each day.

Lance Armstrong won the Tour De France seven times after he was diagnosed with cancer. He took the same chemo drug that I did.

Now, I am not Lance Armstrong and I will never win the Tour de France, but I can keep moving.

And as long as I moved, I was alive.

2. Enjoy the quiet time but learn when to make noise.

It is easy to get caught up in the stuff of life – work, carpools, errands.

But, we need to take time to enjoy the quiet – and for each of us, it's different. A book, music, a movie, a friend. We're allowed to relax.

But sometimes, we have to make noise.

Pick your battle – maybe it's personal, maybe professional.

For me, the personal became the political.

A few months after my surgery, one day when I was getting chemotherapy, a reporter called my office.

He had heard a rumor – I had cancer and I was going to resign – QUIT.

It was not true – the quitting part. But, I had tried to keep the cancer quiet.

So, I called a press conference – with my doctor – and announced I had cancer – announced I was getting chemotherapy – announced I had lost all of my hair.

And I used the press conference to encourage people to get routine exams – to go for that annual physical or checkup. To listen to the whispers of their bodies.

And I used that press conference to call for more funding for Cancer research and treatment.

And I used that press conference to give some meaning to the poison that was in my body.

I had to make noise.

And I am still making noise - every chance I get.

I was lucky. My cancer was detected at a very early stage. I have good health insurance and great medical care.

Many other women, however, particularly young women, poor women or those with higher risks, may not have the knowledge or power to be proactive about their health.

And that's not right. We need to change the system so that everyone can get the quality of health care that I did.

As a community, we need to find a cure, invest in research, develop effective screening techniques for early diagnosis for better treatments, ensure medical care for the uninsured and for those who cannot afford it, and guarantee that we make medical decisions with our doctors and nurses, and not with our insurance companies.

We need to be Advocates – to **Make our Mark**.

3. Through it all, I learned a powerful lesson – time is limited. But hope is not.

It is still painful to talk about my cancer. I try to talk to other women when they find out. The telltale signs are everywhere – I can't seem to throw my scarfs away. I'm ok – you will be too.

I learned that sometimes it's the simplest things that bring us happiness and comfort.

When my two daughters came home to be with me for each chemo session, I saw them through new eyes.

When someone I just barely knew stopped by with a casserole, I almost cried – and not because I hate casseroles.

When I left a funeral early because of my fear, a new friend followed me – cancer is not all the same – she said.

I asked my doctor what I should do – Live Your Life – she said.

And so I do.

I am a mother, a friend, a daughter, a sister, a former mayor, a commissioner, and now – thanks to a simple routine examination – I am a Cancer Survivor.

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